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ABSTRACT

Simulation was used as a teaching method in a family communication class to foster a feeling of empathy with others. Although the course was originally designed to be taught as a seminar, the large number of students prompted the division of students into groups of five or six, characterized as families, each of which was to discuss concepts and issues in class and work on projects outside of class. The family groups developed their own networks of communication as the semester progressed. One advantage of using the simulated family system was that students began to identify with their group and to rely on the others for support in group discussion. Another was that the active discussion in the groups allowed students to discover and analyze their own communication behavior as well as that of others. Although some weaknesses did appear, such as the tendency to oversimplify a situation because of the narrowness of point of view and the length of time the simulation required, the strengths of using the simulated family systems outweighed the weaknesses. (DF)

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Simulation as a Teaching Method
in Family Communication Class

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"Simulation: assumption of a particular appearance or form." The American College Dictionary.

The principle of empathy tells us that if we want to understand another person, then we need to "feel into" that person; to put ourselves in their shoes, so to speak. When we are able to do so, we are in a position to learn more about them-how they might feel about something and why. To use simulation as a teaching method in a class such as Family Communication is an attempt to put this principle to work.

The purpose of this paper is to explain the use of simulation as a teaching method in Family Communication class. This purpose will be fulfilled by examining first the simulated family systems which were set up in a class; secondly by describing the family communication messages used by these family systems; and finally by evaluating the nature of the learning available to the students involved in the simulation.

During the Spring semester of 1985, a course entitled "Family Communication" was offered for the first time on the campus of Missouri Western State College. Although it was an experimental course, was not listed in the college catalogs and was not required of any students at MWSC, at the close of the registration period 27 students were enrolled in the class. This was a larger enrollment than had been expected. An enrollment of 10-12 students had been projected. The larger number was helpful in pointing out to the administration the felt need for such a class on a permanent basis, but plans had been made to teach the class as a seminar.

It would be difficult to involve all 27 students adequately in seminar discussion and still have time needed to present conceptual materials.

It was decided to divide the class into groups of 5-6 people each and to characterize each group as a "Family". Each group would work as a family system to (1) discuss concepts, problems, and issues in class; (2) work on projects and assignments both in class and outside of class; and (3) prepare for examinations by meeting together on their own time to study and review. Group members would be instructed to think of their family groups as part of a larger system--the "community" of the class. By doing this it would be possible to examine the interaction of the "family" with the "community".

As the semester progressed, the family groups each developed their own networks of communication. One group had an obvious "wheel" network, with the "mother" at the hub. Most of the groups developed alliances within them. These networks and alliances were used to illustrate to the class those concepts as they relate to family communication.

Each family group also developed its own set of communication barriers. These were analogous to the barriers one might find in "real" families--barriers relating to such things as role perceptions and expectations, power, strategies, stress, and use of time and space. Just as communication networks were used as examples, so were the communication barriers.

These simulated family systems began to develop their own communication networks and barriers in much the same way as "real" family groups develop theirs--by bringing together the variety of experiences, expectations, and information of each individual. Each member of the simulated family brought with him/her the accumulated family experiences from his/her

family-of-origin. Not only did these accumulated family experiences affect the process of communication, it affected the nature of the messages being communicated.

In the simulated families, one set of family communication messages which were easily observed were the messages which defined roles. The effects of family-of-origin on these role messages became a major part of the teaching/learning experience.

In originally assigning students to the simulated family groups, an attempt was made to set up a balance of male and female members and the role of each member was arbitrarily assigned by the instructor. For example, one group consisted of five students, three female and two male. Roles assigned were father, mother, older sister, younger sister (middle child), little brother. The siblings were to assume that they were closely spaced in birth order and that they were all older teen-agers. Parents were to assume that they were in the early forties age range. Another group of six students were assigned the roles of mother, father, maternal grandmother, older sister, brother (middle child), younger sister. Children were to assume young teen range, parent's the early forties, and grandmother the early seventies.

When the students were assigned roles, they were told to behave in their simulated family as their experience told them they should behave. This meant that they each relied on sets of messages about behavior which they brought with them and which, for the most part, came from their own family-of-origin. Because each student had a different set of family-of-origin experiences, there was some confusion at times about role behavior. This confusion resulted in an appreciation for feedback as part

of the communication process.

Feedback became the means by which the students began to evaluate their own perceptions of role behavior. As each one brought his/her idea of the behavior of the role assigned to the family simulation, an awareness developed of the reactions of each other to those behaviors. This reliance on feedback helped the students understand that a fixed view of family roles was not as appropriate as an interactive perspective. Even though each had a view of "traditional" family role behavior they found there was more than one traditional view.

The importance of the interactive perspective was further illustrated when the simulated family groups took part in assigned role playing situations. Later in the semester, after the family simulation had gone on long enough for each group member to become accustomed to his/her role behavior in the group, the families were assigned situations in which they were to work through a problem. Up to this point the groups had worked together primarily as discussion groups and study groups. They had realized some differences existed in the views held about role behaviors, and had made some changes as a result, attempting to establish the kind of behavior pattern most acceptable in their group. However, when problem situations were introduced and group members tried to work through those problems, behaving as they felt the person whose role they filled would behave, they found that differences in perspective were accentuated.

At first there was quite a bit of frustration experienced by the students in trying to understand how and why these differences of perspective affected family interaction. Finally one young man suggested that in his family-of-origin, in order to understand each other better, they

sometimes traded roles and tried to act as though they were the other person. Others in the class felt that it might be helpful to do that in this situation. Roles were switched so that different ones in the family simulation could play them as they thought they should be played. In some cases sex-role reversal was used. Following these role-switching experiences, discussion was carried out concerning discovered feelings and behavioral differences.

What the students began to point out to each other was that although there were many similarities in the way some of them viewed the "traditional" family roles, and even though many minor differences could be co-opted through interaction, there were some deeply ingrained family-of-origin messages which emerged more strongly when the problem situations were presented. These family-of-origin messages could cause some real conflict between persons in various roles, because of the differences which existed from one family-of-origin to another. While this discovery may not be surprising to those who spend their lives studying such things, it was surprising to these students.

Because they were so surprised by the strength and persistence of these family-of-origin messages about role behavior, the students began to explore, through observation of each other in simulation groups and through discussion, how these family messages differed and where they came from in the family-of-origin. They interviewed their parents, grandparents, and other relatives about role behavior perspectives. What was found and shared was a realization that these messages about role behaviors were intergenerational in nature with much of the information having been passed from generation to generation for at least three generations in most cases.

(Grandparent to parent to child). One student was able to talk to her great-grandmother while another older student, who was a grandmother herself, was able to observe and interview four generations, also. In both these cases it was observed that many role behavior messages had been passed through four generations.

In focusing on these intergenerational messages about role behavior within the family, the students began to suspect that each family had a body of messages, or myths, which helped define the family's self-image. In discussing this idea and comparing notes with each other, the students decided that, in addition to the intergenerational messages about individual role behaviors, there were also messages about the family's role in society. These were messages about family themes. They could be both positive and negative in their affect on the family in its relationship to the community.

Because the students felt that the family myths about theme and about role behaviors could have either a positive or a negative effect, they felt that they should make some attempt to find ways to modify these myths. Through discussion, the students reached the following conclusions:

1. Family myths about role behavior in the family are important as a means of learning how to be a part of a family.
2. Family myths about the theme of the family and its place in the community are important to help the family maintain its identity.
3. Family myths may have negative effects on a family when family members bring conflicting images or perspectives of roles from families-of-origin, especially if they hold a static view of those roles.
4. Family myths may have negative effects on a family when family

members cannot accept changes in family theme to fit changes in the societal environment.

5. The first step in overcoming the negative effects of family is to attempt to understand what those myths are and to share that understanding with others.
6. There must be an interactive perspective of role behaviors and family themes to allow for change when needed. A static view of each of these may be detrimental to the family. It is important to talk about them.

Evaluation of the use of simulated family systems as a teaching method in Family Communication class shows us that there are both strengths and weaknesses--advantages and disadvantages. First, the strengths will be discussed, then we will examine some weaknesses which appeared.

During the semester, several advantages, or strengths, of the use of the simulated family systems became evident. The first of these advantages was that the students in each group quickly began to identify with their group, and found that they could rely on each other for support in class discussion. They even began to share problems not directly related to class. This sense of belonging seemed to generalize to the class and helped it to function as a "community," with concern for each of its members.

A second advantage was that the family groups themselves gave readily available illustrations and examples of family roles, communication barriers, communication networks, alliances, and other characteristics of family communication. It was easy for the students to see from their own experience the different concepts that were brought out in lecture and in the assigned readings.

A third advantage was the active discussion which went on in the groups wherein the students were able to discover and analyze their own communication behavior and the behavior of others. Because of the closeness, they were able to be analytic without seeming to threaten each other. This analysis helped the students to discover concepts which had not as yet been discussed in lecture, and it strongly reinforced those points when they were covered in class or in readings.

A fourth advantage was the way students used the groups to solve problems relative to family communication. They were able to share ideas about problems and share alternative solutions. Several students felt that the simulated experience would help them to use their own families-of-origin as problem-solving groups. They expressed a belief that it would help strengthen the communication in those families.

Some weaknesses of using the simulated family method did appear. One of these was that, because they were simulations, it was easy to focus on specific behaviors or events and magnify the characteristics evident in those events out of proportion. In a real family there would be so many mediating factors that didn't appear in the simulations--things such as past history and personal familiarity--that would keep things in a different proportion than they reached in class. The absence of these factors in some cases emphasized the artificiality of the simulation.

A related weakness was the tendency to oversimplify a situation because of the narrowness of point of view. Without past history to rely on it became easy to say "here is a cause and here is a solution." At times other causes or solutions might have been appropriate, but were not brought out because of the oversimplification. One example was the focus on role

behavior on the part of the groups. It seemed that that focus was all that they needed to solve many family communication problems. More time and a broader perspective would probably have been able to point out several other causes and solutions.

Time was a problem, too. The simulation took a great deal of time. It became necessary to drop some planned activities that might also have been beneficial. There was also a problem of lack of control on the part of the instructor, but this could also be in advantage. In this case the students became very creative in their problem-solving and discussed many things concerning family communication that otherwise would only have been covered in lecture.

The recommendation I would make concerning the use of simulated family systems as a teaching method in a family communication class is that its strengths far out weigh its weaknesses. My students were able to "feel into" many different family roles, family types, and family messages. This empathy would not have been a part of this learning experience without the use of simulation. I believe it is a good method to use in any class stressing relationships and human interaction. Try it, you might like it.